Argentine Ants

Correctly identify the species

Argentine ants, *Linepithema humile*, are brown, slender, and about one-eighth inch long. They usually nest under boards, stones, tree stumps, and potted plants. Consult University of California Pest Note #7411 (www.ucipm.ucdavis.edu) or take specimens to your UC Cooperative Extension office (see county pages of your local phone directory).

Biology and behavior

- Argentine ants are the most common ants in California, and their nests are believed to cover much of the state as one huge supercolony, making eradication impossible.
- Argentine ants obtain protein from eating insects, including many pests, but they prefer honeydew, which is a sweet excretion produced by aphids, scales, mealybugs and whiteflies. You'll often find these ants in trees and shrubs infested with honeydew-producing insects.
- Ants often come indoors to find food during summer and fall when honeydew production declines.
- Ants feed each other by transferring food mouth to mouth, so slow-acting baits are more effective than sprays because foraging ants survive long enough to transfer the poison to other workers and the queens.
- Colonies begin to shrink soon after the bait kills the queens.
- Both sugary and protein-containing baits may be necessary to manage Argentine ants.

Inspection and monitoring

- Examine plants for aphid, scale, mealybug, and whitefly infestations, especially during the spring.
- Look for outdoor nests next to buildings, along sidewalks, around trees and shrubs, and under boards, stones, tree stumps, and potted plants. Nests consist of thousands of worker ants and several larger queens, plus microscopic eggs, tiny white larvae, and pupae that resemble grains of rice.

What if you see only a few ants?

You may not mind seeing ants outdoors, but even a few can be objectionable in classrooms, teachers' lounges or food service areas. Often a few stragglers are scouting new feeding or nesting sites, and within hours you may have a steady trail of ants streaming in. Vacuum or use soapy water to clean up trails—in a labeled spray bottle combine 1 tablespoon dish soap and 1 quart water.

Ant management for *teachers*

- Keep classrooms clean by allowing food and beverages only in designated areas, then cleaning thoroughly.
- Ask students to remove food from lockers, cubbies, and desks daily. *[list continued on reverse side]*

Checklist for managing ant infestations

- ❑ **Identify** the ant species to maximize the effectiveness of your management strategy.
- ❑ **Monitor** by inspecting perimeters of buildings. Examine plants that support honeydew-producing insects.
- ❑ **Include sanitation** as your main preventive strategy. Clean up food debris in classrooms, empty classroom garbage daily, rinse recyclables before storing, place outdoor garbage cans and dumpsters away from doorways. Use soapy water to clean up ant trails.
- ❑ **Exclude** ants by caulking cracks and holes around foundations, and around pipes and wires. Seal indoor cracks and crevices. Band the trunks of honeydew-covered trees and shrubs with sticky materials such as Tanglefoot® so ants cannot reach their favorite food source.
- ❑ **Communicate!** Keep teachers and other staff informed of pest management actions.
- ❑ **Educate** staff and students so they can help prevent re-infestation and encourage successful treatment.
- ❑ **Use least-hazardous chemical practices** if necessary such as bait stations and bait gels. Sprays kill only the few ants you see—you'll miss the millions living safely in inaccessible nests. It's important to use **slow-acting baits** that reach the queens and think about ant management as an area-wide project.

Teachers, continued

- Keep any food, including pet food, stored in sealed containers.
- Take classroom pets home during severe ant infestations.
- Clean up the teachers' lounge before heading home every day.
- Communicate with custodial staff about special needs or ant sightings.

Ant management for *food service staff*

- Store food in containers with tight lids made of plastic, glass, or metal.
- Keep indoor garbage in lined, covered containers and empty daily.
- Clean food spills promptly.
- Clean food-soiled dishes, utensils, and surfaces by the end of each day.
- Maintain clean shelves in storage areas.
- Communicate with maintenance staff about repairing leaks, and custodial staff about emptying garbage daily and vacuuming up ant trails.

Sanitation is the key to ant management!

Ant management for *custodial staff*

- Vacuum up ant trails using a strong vacuum or wipe up with soapy water.
- Empty garbage daily from classrooms and food service areas.
- Place outdoor garbage containers on hard, cleanable surfaces and at least 50 feet away from building entrances.
- Wash all garbage containers regularly—wash those outdoors at least monthly and keep area around them clean.
- Collect litter from school grounds at least once weekly.
- Have recyclables collected at least once weekly.
- Communicate pest management roles to staff and students, including removing food or food wrappers from lockers, cubbies, and desks on a daily basis.
- Clean floors and vacuum carpets daily in areas where food is served, and at least weekly in other areas.
- Eliminate spills in storage and receiving areas and maintain clean shelves.

Ant management for *maintenance staff*

- Caulk cracks and crevices.
- Weatherstrip doors and windows.
- Fix leaky pipes under sinks.
- Apply a sticky substance such as Tanglefoot® around trunks of trees and large shrubs infested with honeydew producers. Trim any branches that contact buildings.

Least-hazardous chemical control

Note: Dusts and liquid insecticides are not exempt from Healthy Schools Act (HSA) requirements.

- **Dusts**—Injected into wall voids and cracks & crevices. Active ingredients include boric acid, diatomaceous earth, and silica aerogel. The ants die by drying out.
- **Baits**—Exempt from notification and posting requirements if bait is confined in a self-contained trap (bait station), or formulated as gel or paste applied to cracks and crevices. Active ingredients include abamectin, boric acid, fipronil, and hydramethylnon.

Using aerosols or other sprays often reduces the effectiveness of baits. The ants you see foraging are only the tip of the iceberg—if you kill these with a fast-acting spray, thousands more will soon replace them. This is why it's important to use slow-acting baits that reach the queens via mouth-to-mouth feeding of the workers. *Think about management as an area-wide project.*

For more information

Visit DPR's school IPM Web site at

www.schoolipm.info

For additional information about ants see the link to UC IPM's Pest Note #7411

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